

# ON GERMAN ARCHITECTURE

(1773)

VON DEUTSCHER BAUKUNST

D. M.

ERVINI A STEINBACH

As I wandered about at your grave, noble Erwin,<sup>1</sup> in order to pour out my veneration for you at the sacred spot itself, I looked for the stone which bore this inscription: “Anno Domini 1318, XVI. Kal. Febr. obiit Magister Ervinus, Gubernator Fabricae Ecclesiae Argentinensis;” and when I could not find it and none of your countrymen could point it out to me, I became sad of soul, and my heart, younger, warmer, more tender and better than it is now, vowed a memorial to you, of marble or sandstone, as might be in my power, when I came into the peaceful enjoyment of my fortune.

But what need have you for a memorial! You have built the most splendid memorial for yourself; and although the ants who crawl around there do not trouble themselves about your name, yet you have a destiny like that of the builder who heaped up mountains into the clouds.

To few has it been granted to create such mighty

<sup>1</sup> Erwin von Steinbach, one of the architects of the Strassburg Cathedral.

## *Goethe's Literary Essays*

ideas in their minds, complete, gigantic, and consistently beautiful down to the last detail, like trees of God: to fewer was it given to find a thousand willing hands to work, to excavate the rocky foundation, to conjure up towering structures upon it, and then when dying to say to their sons,—I remain with you in the works of my genius: carry on to its completion in the clouds what I have begun.

What need have you for memorials! and from me! When the rabble utters sacred names, it is either superstition or blasphemy. Those of feeble spirit and taste will always have their head turned before your mighty work, and genuine souls will come to know you without a guide.

Therefore, honored man, before I venture again my patched-up bark upon the ocean, destined as it is more likely to death than to fame and fortune, see, here in this grove where bloom the names of my loves, I cut yours on a beech-tree which lifts its slender trunk high in the air like your own tower, and I hang on it too this handkerchief filled with gifts, not unlike that sheet which was let down from the clouds to the holy apostle, full of clean and unclean beasts: for this is full of flowers and buds and leaves, and some dried grass and moss and fungi, which on my walk through these uninteresting regions I coldly gathered as a pastime for my botanical collection,—I dedicate them to death in your honor.

What a trivial style, says the Italian, and passes by. Childishness, lisps the Frenchman, and snaps his finger against his snuff-box à la Grecque. What have you done that you dare to despise?

## *On German Architecture*

But you, O Italian, you have let the genius of the ancients, arising from its grave, fetter and bind your own.. You crept to beg for artistic knowledge from the splendid relics of the olden time, you patched together palaces from these sacred ruins, and consider yourself the guardian of the secrets of art, because you can give account of the measurements by inch and line of enormous buildings. Had you *felt* more than you *measured*, had the spirit of the gigantic structures at which you gazed come to you, you would not have imitated merely because they did it thus and it is beautiful. But you would have created your own designs, and there would have flowed out of them living beauty to instruct you.

Thus upon your shortcomings you have plastered a whitewashing, a mere appearance of truth and beauty. The splendid effect of pillars struck you, you wished to use them in your building and have great rows of columns too; so you encircled St. Peter's with marble passageways, which lead nowhere in particular, so that mother Nature, who despises and hates the inappropriate and the unnecessary, drove your rabble to prostitute that splendor for public "*cloaca*," with the result that you turn away your eyes and hold your nose before the wonder of the world.

Everything goes the same way: the whim of the artist serves the caprice of the rich man; the writer of travels stands agape, and our *beaux esprits*, called philosophers, wrest out of formless myths facts and principles of art to be applied to the present day: and their evil genius murders sincere men at the threshold of these mysteries.

More harmful to the genius than examples are rules.

## *Goethe's Literary Essays*

Before his time individual men may have worked up individual parts and aspects. He is the first from whose mind come the parts grown together into one ever-living whole. But a school or a rule fetters all the power of his insight and his activity. What is it to us, you modern French philosophical critic, that the first inventor, responding to necessity, stuck four trunks in the ground, bound on them four poles and covered it all with branches and moss? To determine from this what is appropriate for our present needs is like demanding that your new Babylon be ruled by the old despotic patriarchal father-right.

And in addition it is not true that this house of yours is the most primitive form in the world. That with two poles in front crossed at the end, two in back and one lying straight between them for a ridge-pole is, as we can notice every day in the huts in the fields and vineyards, a far more primitive invention, from which you could hardly abstract a principle for your pig-pen.

Thus none of your conclusions are able to rise into the region of truth, but all hang in the lower atmosphere of your system. You wish to teach us what we ought to use, since what we do use, according to your principles cannot be justified.

The column is very dear to you, and in another clime you would be prophet. You say: The column is the first essential ingredient of a building, and the most beautiful. What noble elegance of form, what pure grandeur, when they are placed in a row! Only guard against using them inappropriately; it is their nature to be free and detached. Alas for the unfortunates who try to join the slender shape of them to heavy walls!

## *On German Architecture*

Yet it seems to me, dear abbé, that the frequent repetition of this impropriety of building columns into walls, so that the moderns have even stuffed the intercolumnia of ancient temples with masonry, might have aroused in your mind some reflections. If your ears were not deaf to the truth, these stones would have preached a sermon to you.

Columns are in no way an ingredient in our dwellings; they contradict rather the style of all our buildings. Our houses have not their origin in four columns placed in four corners. They are built out of four walls on four sides, which take the place of columns, indeed exclude all columns, and where these are used to patch up, they are an encumbrance and a superfluity. This is true of our palaces and churches, with the exception of a few cases, which I do not need to mention.

Thus your buildings exhibit mere surface, which, the broader it is extended,—the higher it is raised to the sky,—the more unendurable must become the monotony which oppresses the soul. But Genius came to our aid, and said to Erwin von Steinbach: Diversify the huge wall, which you are to raise heavenward, so that it may soar like a lofty, far-spreading tree of God, which with a thousand branches, millions of twigs, and leaves like the sand of the sea, proclaims everywhere the glory of God, its Master.

When I went for the first time to the Minster, my head was full of the common cant of “good taste.” From hearsay, I was an admirer of the harmony of mass, the purity of form, and was a sworn enemy to

## *Goethe's Literary Essays*

the confused arbitrariness of Gothic adornment. Under the term, "Gothic," like the article in a dictionary, I piled all the misconceptions which had ever come into my head, of the indefinite, the unregulated, the unnatural, the patched-up, the strung-together, the superfluous, in art. No wiser than a people which calls the whole foreign world, "barbarous," everything was Gothic to me that did not fit into my system, from the turned wooden dolls and pictures of gay colors, with which the bourgeois nobility decorate their houses, to the dignified relics of the older German architecture, my opinion of which, because of some bizarre scroll-work, had been that of everybody,—"Quite buried in ornamentation!"; consequently I had an aversion to seeing it, such as I would have before a malformed bristling monster.

With what unexpected emotions did the sight surprise me when I actually saw it! An impression of grandeur and unity filled my soul, which, because it consisted of a thousand harmonizing details, I could taste and enjoy, but by no means understand and explain. They say it is thus with the rapture of heaven. How often I returned to enjoy this heavenly-earthly rapture, to embrace the stupendous genius of our older brothers in their works. How often I returned to view from every side, at every distance, in every light of the day, its dignity and splendor. Hard it is for the mind of man when his brother's work is so elevated that he can only bow down and pray. How often has the evening twilight refreshed with its friendly calm my eyes wearied by too much gazing; it made countless details melt together into a complete whole and mass, and now, simple and grand, it stood before my eyes, and,

## *On German Architecture*

full of rapture, my power unfolded itself both to enjoy and to understand it at once. There was revealed to me in soft intimations the genius of the great builder. "Why are you astonished?" He whispered to me. "All these masses were necessary, and do you not see them in all the older churches of my city? Only I have given harmonious proportion to their arbitrary vastnesses. See how, over the principal entrance which commands two smaller ones on either side, the wide circle of the window opens which corresponds to the nave of the church and was formerly merely a hole to let the light in; see how the bell-tower demands the smaller windows! All this was necessary, and I designed it with beauty. But what of these dark and lofty apertures here at the side which seem to stand so empty and meaningless? In their bold slender forms I have hidden the mysterious strength which was to raise both of those towers high in the air, of which alas only one stands there sadly, without the crown of five towers which I had planned for it, so that to it and its royal brother the country about would do homage." And so he parted from me, and I fell into a sympathetic mood of melancholy, until the birds of morning, which dwelt in its thousand orifices, greeted the sun joyously and waked me out of my slumber. How freshly it shone in the morning rays, how joyfully I stretched my arms towards it, surveying its vast harmonious masses, animated by countless delicate details of structure! as in the works of eternal Nature, every form, down to the smallest fibril, alive, and everything contributing to the purpose of the whole! How lightly the monstrous, solidly grounded building soared into the air! how free and delicate everything about it, and yet solid for eter-

## *Goethe's Literary Essays*

nity! To your teaching, noble genius, I owe thanks that I did not faint and sink before your heights and depths, but that into my soul flowed a drop of that calm rapture of the mighty soul which could look on this creation, and like God say,—“It is good!”

And now I ought not to be angry, revered Erwin, when the German critic and scholar, taking the cue from envious neighbors, and misjudging the superiority of your work, belittles it by the little understood term, “Gothic”; since he ought rather to give thanks that he can proclaim loudly that this is German architecture,—our architecture,—whereas the Italians cannot boast of any distinctively native style, much less the French. And if you are not willing to admit to yourself this superiority, at least show us then that the Goths have already built in this style,—in which effort you may encounter some difficulties. And finally, if you cannot demonstrate that there was a Homer already before Homer, then we will gladly allow the story of small attempts, successful and unsuccessful, and come reverently back to the work of the master who first drew the scattered elements together into one living whole. And you, my dear brother in the spirit, in your search for truth and beauty, close your ears to the loud talk about the plastic arts,—come, enjoy, survey. Beware of desecrating the name of your noblest artist, and hasten here that you may enjoy and see his glorious work. If it makes an unfavorable impression or none, then farewell, hitch up, and take the road straight for Paris.

But you I would accompany, dear youth, who stand there, your soul moved, and yet unable to harmonize

## *On German Architecture*

the contradictions which conflict in your mind, now feeling the irresistible power of the great whole, now calling me a dreamer for seeing beauty where you see only violence and roughness. Do not let a misunderstanding part us, do not let the feeble teaching of the modern standards of beauty spoil you for vigorous though rough strength, so that finally your sickly sensibility is able to endure only meaningless insipidities. They would have you believe that the fine arts originated in the tendency which they impute to us to beautify the things about us. That is not true! For in the sense in which it could be true, it is the bourgeois and the artisans who use the words and not the philosopher.

*is for native love of creation*  
Art ~~has~~ a long period of growth before it is beautiful, certainly sincere and great art has, and it is often sincerer and greater than when it becomes beautiful. For in man there is a creative disposition, which comes into activity as soon as his existence is assured. As soon as he has nothing to worry about or to fear, this semi-divinity in him, working effectively in his spiritual peace and assurance, grasps materials into which to breathe its own spirit. Thus the savage depicts, with strange lines and forms, ghastly figures, lurid colors, his weapons and his body. And even if these pictures consist of the most arbitrary and incongruous forms and lines, they will, without any intended proportion or balance, yet have a sort of harmony; for a unity of feeling created out of them a characteristic whole.

Now this characteristic art is the only genuine art. If only it comes fresh from the inner soul, expressing the original, unique sensibilities, untroubled, indeed

## *Goethe's Literary Essays*

unconscious of any external element, it may spring from rough savagery or from cultivated sensitiveness, yet it will always be complete and alive. This you can see among nations and individual men in countless degrees. The more the soul rises to the feeling for relations, which alone are beautiful and from eternity, whose master-chords one can demonstrate, whose mysteries one can only feel, in which alone the life of the divine genius seeks expression in enraptured melodies; the more this beauty pervades the soul of a genius so that it seems to have originated with him, so that nothing else satisfies him, so that he can bring nothing else out of himself, the more fortunate is the artist, the more splendid is he, and the more reverently do we stand there and worship God's anointed.

From the level to which Erwin has mounted no one will drag him down. Here stands his work; gaze at it and appreciate the deepest feelings for truth and beauty and proportion, working out of a strong, sturdy, rough German soul, out of the narrow, somber, priest-haunted "medium aevum."

And our own "aevum"? It has neglected its genius, driven forth its sons to collect strange excrescences for their corruption. The agile Frenchman, who in unscrupulous fashion collects where he will, has at least an ingenuity in working together his booty into a sort of unity; he builds his wonderful church of the Magdalene out of Greek columns and German arches and vaults. From one of our architects, who was requested to design a portal for an old German church, I have seen a model of perfect, stately antique column-work.

How hateful our varnished doll-painters are to me I cannot express. By their theatrical positions, their

## *On German Architecture*

false tints, and gaily-colored costumes, they have captured the eyes of women. But, manly Albrecht Dürer, whom these novices laugh at, your woodcut figures are more welcome to me.

And you yourselves, excellent men, to whom it was given to enjoy the highest beauty, and now come down to announce your bliss, you do prejudice to genius. It will soar and progress on no alien wings, even though they were the wings of the morning. Its own original powers are those which unfold in the dreams of childhood, which grow during the life of youth, until strong and supple like the mountain-lion he starts out after his prey. Nature does most in training these powers, for you pedagogues can never counterfeit the multifarious scene which she provides for a youth to draw from and enjoy in the measure of his present strength.

Welcome, to you, young man, who have been born with a keen eye for form and proportion, with the facility to practise in all forms. If then there awakes gradually in you the joy of life, and you come to feel the rapture which men know after work, fear and hope,—the spirited cries of the laborer in the vineyard when the bounty of the harvest swells his vats, the lively dance of the reaper when he has hung his idle sickle high on the beam,—when all the powerful nerves of desire and suffering live again more manfully in your brush, and you have striven and suffered enough and have enjoyed enough, and are filled with earthly beauty, and worthy to rest in the arms of the goddess, worthy to feel on her bosom what gave new birth to the deified Hercules—then receive him, heavenly beauty, thou mediator between gods and men, and let him, more than